DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 185 467 CG 014 315

AUTHOR Blocker, Merrie D.: Gurian, B. S.
TITLE Outreach Program in the Arts for the Low-Income Elderly: Analysis of Pilot Program for the Low-Income Elderly.
PUB DATE Sep 79
NOTE 9p.: Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (32nd, Washington, DC, November 25-29, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education: *Adult Programs: *Art Education: *Low Income Groups: *Museums: *Older Adults: *Outreach Programs: Program Descriptions: Program Effectiveness: Program Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *DeCordova Museum School MA

ABSTRACT

An outreach program was conducted during the 1978-79 year by the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts for the low-income elderly in conjunction with the local councils on aging and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and Title III of the Older Americans Act. Components of the program are described, including drop-in workshops at daily meal sites, drop-in centers in the participating towns and scholarships for transportation, and tuition and supplies for courses at the DeCordova Museum School. The effectiveness of the program is analyzed in terms of ability to reach a group that otherwise had no way of participating in art school classes without financial assistance, specifically those persons whose average age was 72 and average income was $6500 per year. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

DE CORDOVA MUSEUM

Lincoln, Massachusetts 01773 617-259-8821

Merrie D. Blocker, Director of Outreach Education
and B.S. Gurian

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Merrie D. Blocker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED185467

CG014315

September, 1979

Outreach Program in the Arts for the Low-Income Elderly:
Analysis of Pilot Program for the Low-Income Elderly

During the 1978-1979 school year the DeCordova Museum School of Art in Lincoln, Massachusetts in cooperation with the Acton, Concord, Lincoln, Stow and Maynard Councils on Aging conducted an outreach program for the low-income elderly. This program, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and Title III of the Older Americans Act, integrated 50 senior citizens into our regularly scheduled art classes which normally serve a younger and much more affluent population. Through this program we demonstrated that the elderly want and can successfully participate in substantial educational programs if the psychological, financial and physical barriers to their participation are removed.

The outreach program consisted of:

1) drop-in workshops at daily meal sites and drop-in centers in the participating towns. These workshops were organized to acquaint the elderly with the offerings at the DeCordova School. Local welfare, mental health, religious and housing organizations helped us identify isolated members of the elderly population who would benefit from inclusion in this project,

2) scholarships for tuition and supplies for courses in the fine arts at the DeCordova Museum School. These courses are held once a week for three hours for a period of fifteen weeks,

3) transportation to the courses at the DeCordova (provided by Council on Aging vans and volunteers),

4) individual counseling sessions and monthly support group meetings that included a tour of the current exhibition at the DeCordova and refreshments. Transportation was provided to these monthly sessions and program participants could bring a friend along if they wished,

5) paying jobs as teaching assistants in DeCordova's classes for children.

Through this program we were able to reach a group that traditionally had not participated in our art school classes. The average age of students participating in this project is 72 and the average family income is $6500/year. (Our normal student body has a median family income of $28,000/year and a median age of 43.) Three-quarters of the participants in this project required transportation and few of them had ever visited a museum or enrolled in a continuing education class prior to enrolling in this program.

Background

The DeCordova Museum School is a fine arts, continuing education school offering classes in all the visual arts to beginners as well as advanced students. The School is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary and currently serves over 3500 students annually.

The DeCordova School initiated this program for the low-income elderly because of a concern that the School's activities were only reaching white, upper-middle class people between the ages of 25-60. We agreed with the U.S. Congress' statement in Title I of the Higher Education Amendment of 1976 that "American society should have as a goal the availability of appropriate opportunities for lifelong learning for all its citizens without regard to restrictions on previous education or training, sex, age, handicapping condition, social or ethnic background or economic circumstance."

But in practice not all Americans are benefitting equally from the opportunities for lifelong learning offered by our educational and cultural institutions. As discussed in a September 1977 New York Times article, "the lifelong learning boom has primarily benefitted the privileged - those who are educated, wealthy and white." Those who are already educated seek more education. Those who have not developed the education "habit" don't. In the same article, Eugene Weldon, Special Assistant to the Deputy Commissioner for Higher and Continuing Education of the U.S. Office of Education stated, "All research indicates that education promotes education.... We don't know what we don't know until we learn something."

The elderly are particularly effected by the phenomena Weldon describes. As discussed by Dr. K. Peter Etzkorn, Professor of Sociology at the University of Missouri, today's senior citizens often do not participate in educational and cultural activities because they "received their formal schooling in the years from around the turn of the century to the outbreak of World War I...[when] leisure and artistic pursuits...were the privilege of Veblen's leisure class." Therefore, today's older adults were socialized during a period when the basic values were those of "rugged individualism, industry and work," an ethic quite different from today's. This earlier structure of basic values and the life style it spawned is often the reason many senior citizens do not seek out fulfilling leisure time activities.

Therefore if continuing education is to serve the needs of the elderly we the educators must reach out to senior citizens to acquaint them with the advantages that participation in educational activities can offer them. The New York Times article cited above agrees that adult education programs do not seem "to be meeting the needs of those who need them the most." The author feels that it is the lack of special outreach efforts that often prevents various possible recipients of educational services from receiving these services. "...unlike other levels of education few serious efforts have been made to address the 'access' question.... Those in charge of adult education programs reach

out...to their most accessible clientele - people like themselves who are white, affluent and well-educated."

The DeCordova School decided to try to change this situation. We designed this program to provide psychological, physical and financial accessibility to our continuing education programs for the low-income elderly. The psychological problems were overcome through drop-in workshops at which the elderly could meet with our teachers and participate in art activities such as ceramics, quilt-making, wood-working, painting and weaving and listen to comments on our school by elderly students already attending our classes. In addition to the monthly support group meetings, the individual counseling sessions were designed to alleviate any psychological problems that might develop after the start of the program. The physical access problem was overcome by providing transportation to the DeCordova and the financial problem was overcome through scholarships for tuition and supplies.

We chose to serve the low-income elderly segment of the population because we felt that participation in our classes could 1) expose a previously unexposed group to an enriching activity, 2) relieve the isolation often felt by the elderly by integrating them into heterogeneously composed classes given in well-equipped studios under the auspices of a major cultural organization and 3) give to a group with a great deal of leisure time, stimulating avocational interests.

The research that we conducted prior to beginning the program supported our view: that education and the formation of new interests can improve the quality of life for older citizens. These activities can also serve as a preventive anticipatory mechanism for fighting both mental and physical decline in the later years.

Throughout life people must adapt to changes and losses in themselves and in their environment. Retirement, death of a spouse, and the declining health that often accompanies old age are perhaps some of the greatest changes and losses that anyone must ever face. Therefore activities that fill these voids and soften these transitions can be of great importance in the later stages of life. Robert Butler, gerontological psychiatrist and Director of the National Institute on Aging, believes that retirement can participate "...in the genesis of depression, apathy and paranoid states as well as...behavorial and mood changes not of pathological dimensions.... Retirement is not necessarily a cause of psychological problems... [but] in the absence of responsibilities and to those who have no interests, retirement may be disquieting rather than rewarding...." Dr. Butler advises that instead of waiting to treat the elderly when psychological problems do set in, we should concentrate on maintaining good mental health and preventing these problems. "If health is to be promoted and maintained," he states, "it is imperative that older people continue to develop and change in a flexible manner."

Traditionally educators have not been involved in aiding the elderly to develop new interests because it has commonly been believed that intellectual growth stops after the age of 20. Therefore educators do not usually attempt to provide the elderly with stimulating programs. As Roger Hiemstra, Professor of Adult Education at Iowa State University comments, "We tend to place them in 'playpens' by providing recreation... while doing almost nothing to furnish them with the means to keep mentally alert."

But the traditional view that intellect declines after age 20 is changing. Even though the speed of reaction may decrease with age, tests have recently shown that people do not stop growing intellectually after a certain age. In fact, intellectual growth can continue throughout life if the proper stimulus is present. In addition, Hiemstra's recent studies of elderly populations in urban and rural Nebraska show that older people are interested in participating in learning projects, with the highest interest in projects that promote self-fullfillment. But Hiemstra believes that often the elderly do not take advantage of formal education programs to satisfy these interests because of "negative attitudes in society." Often the elderly do not feel welcome in a classroom setting or they have internalized society's myth that " you can't teach an old dog new tricks." Therefore, if educators are to reach many members of the elderly population they must develop special programs that reach out to older people and help them overcome their fears that prevent their involvement in formal educational programs.

Results

In the DeCordova's program we have shown that the elderly do want to learn, that they can benefit from participation in a high quality educational program which stimulates their mental growth and that participation in stimulating activities can indeed improve or prevent the deterioration of mental and/or physical health and aid in a healthy adaptation to old age. We have also shown that psychological, financial and transportation factors have often been the principal reasons that many elderly people do not participate in continuing education programs intended for the public at large.

Participants in this program have commented that the DeCordova's project has allowed them "to do something that I never thought I could do," "to meet new people" "a chance to get out and make new friends," "to learn the pleasure of creating," amd to "develop a new sense of accomplishment." The teachers have commented that the elderly students show tremendous interest and at times even learn at rates much faster than our regular student body.

Many of the people who participated in the program rarely left their towns or homes before coming to the DeCordova. The wife of a 74 year old student told us that he was dispirited and disoriented as a result of serious heart surgery two years ago. She felt that the course at the Decordova had restored his self confidence. Before " he would sit and sleep and complain," she commented. Now when asked how helikes his art class her husband exclaimed, " I love it. It's like being married all

over again." Another student, an 82 year old woman, had deteriorating physical health before she began taking a course at the DeCordova. Since that time the visiting nurse has told us that the student's health has shown definite signs of improvement.

Without the outreach components of our project the students in our program would probably never have enrolled in DeCordova classes. Our participants have rarely visited a museum or taken part in a continuing education program. When questioned, most cite transportation or financial factors as the previous barriers to participation in educational programs. "It didn't fit in my budget," or "I would go to a lot more things, but I don't have a ride." But a recent study of our program by Ellen Sarkisian, a Phd candidate in adult learning at Boston University indicates that psychological factors may be the major reasons that the elderly and particularly the elderly from the lower and middle classes do not participate in continuing education programs.

Ms. Sarkisian's study seems to give support to Dr. Etzkorn's theory that because they were socialized during a period when "the work ethic" was the dominant societal value,many of today's elderly do not consider or even realize the possibility of self-fulfillment that structured leisure time activities may offer them. Even when participants in our program have shown an interest in the fine arts during an earlier phase of their life, they did not connect their earlier interest with their post-retirement needs. One 75 year old student interviewed in Ms. Sarkisian's study commented that she had enjoyed her art class in high school, but when asked if her DeCordova jewelry class was like anything she had ever done before, she commented, " I don't believe so. I worked at Waltham Watch. I worked on watches."

Another student, interviewed, had taken art classes as a young man and had once tried to work as a cartoonist, but did not find cartooning financially rewarding. His office job "was so far away from art that it never entered the picture." He decided to take a course at the DeCordova only after"somebody came down to the old folks' group...and gave us a little speech and wanted to know if any of us wanted to take any of the courses."

But many of our program participants had shown no previous interest in the fine arts. Why did they volunteer for inclusion in the DeCordova's classes? Ms. Sarkisian hypothesizes that " the disengagement" theory of aging that sociologists usually use to explain inactivity in the later years may be the answer. Sociologists usually describe disengagement as a mutual withdrawal of society from the older person and the older person from society as psychological preparation for the ultimate separation that death will cause. But Ms. Sarkisiam cites recent studies that propose that disengagement may be the result of a new freedom that the elderly achieve as they enter their final years of life. This psychological freedom allows them to disregard societal norms. and allows them to follow their " own inclinations irrespective of what others think." Therefore Ms. Sarkisian believes that our elderly students "might feel freed from external expectations so they can do what they want to do, or learn what they want to learn."

Why Was the DeCordova's Program for the Elderly Successful?

1) This program fulfills a need. The elderly do indeed have a substantial amount of freetime and therefore need to find stimulating activities with which to fill this time. They also need to make a healthy adjustment to the life changes caused by retirement and old age. Involvement in meaningful learning projects can assist them in making this transition. These activities can also alleviate the feelings of isolation felt by many older people. The DeCordova program, unlike the typical "recreational activities" usually designed for the elderly, offer older people a chance to participate in rigorous classes that truly stimulate the students' mental growth. These classes are not watered down "crafts for senior citizens" courses. They are courses that are planned for the public at large. The quality of these courses is so high that DeCordova students can receive credits for these courses from the State Art College. In addition, participation in these courses allows the elderly to combat their feelings of isolation by involving them with people of many different age groups and by transporting the elderly from their regular settings to an exciting environment on a weekly basis.

2) This program overcomes the psychological barriers that often prevent the elderly from participating in educational activities planned for the general public. Museums and museum classes are often seen as elite offerings meant for the upper levels of our society. Therefore many low-income people of all ages will shy away from participating in museum activities. The elderly members of this class will shy away even more because they were not brought up to look for interesting ways to structure their leisure time. Also as one of our elderly students commented "One friend of mine is very timid and very lonely. She wants to go somewhere, then she changes her mind. Older people sometimes feel very vulnerable." The DeCordova staff has taken this vulnerability and shyness into account and through our outreach workshops, support group meetings and individual counseling sessions we try to make the elderly students feel sought after and needed. Our counseling sessions were particularly useful in this regard as they allowed us to identify problems quickly so that students were moved to a more suitable class, were able to work out their discomfort over nude models or unfamilar tools or were given the help needed to solve personal problems such as incontinency. Ms. Sarkisian feels that these measures are indeed important contributors to a successful program. "That older people are not only willing but also enthusiastic participants in substantial learning programs is clear," she writes. "But their participation is made possible and enhanced by a welcoming and assisting stance on the part of the institution."

3) This program overcomes the financial and physical barriers that often prevent the elderly from participating in educational activities planned for the general public. This was accomplished by the coordination of transportation services and the funding of scholarships for tuition and supplies.

4) The administration of the program was well thought out and professionally managed. A year of planning including consultation with senior citizen organizations, mental health organizations and sociologists was conducted before the program began, and the program made use of the DeCordova's thirty years of experience in running continuing education programs. In addition, DeCordova staff and faculty members were specially trained in working with the elderly through a workshop conducted by Dr. Bennet Gurian, geriatric psychiatrist with the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health.

Future Goals

1) Students who have completed one or more semesters in our elderly program are eligible for paying positions as teaching assistants in our children's classes. We hope as the program continues that more and more of our students will take advantage of this opportunity.

2) We will continue to generate evaluations of our elderly program that will be used to demonstrate to administrators of continuing education and museum education programs that the elderly do want to participate in substantial learning programs and that they can succeed in these programs. We feel that many educators have not expended their energies in reaching out to the elderly because they have felt that either the elderly were not interested or that they would not succeed in programs planned for the general public. We hope to be able to show that this is a misapprehension. We would also like to show educators that inclusion of the elderly in general programming will not lower the quality of the program for younger students. Rather, we have found the contrary to be true: our more affluent and younger regular students really enjoyed having the elderly in their classes. The enthusiasm the elderly showed was highly infectious and has raised the morale of the DeCordova School as a whole. We hope, when shown the successes of our program, other arts and educational organizations will be inspired to develop similar programs. To this end, the DeCordova Museum Education staff will present papers on this program at the New England Association of Museums Meeting (October, 1979), the Gerontological Society Convention (November, 1979) and the American Association of Museums Meeting (June, 1980).